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Empowering Our Ministry: Laying a Foundation of Discernment

1 Corinthians 2:10-14

Thomas Michael Smith
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I believe in the Bible. I believe that the Bible is God's Word, and is an accurate description of reality. I believe that we can take the Bible at face value. I say this at the beginning of today's message because I want to be clear about my presuppositions. Over the past year or so, we have been engaged in a process of spiritual renewal. This renewal is a work of God, not our work, and frankly, I'm delighted that many of the efforts of renewal have gone on without much of my involvement. God is at work in new and powerful ways at CPC.

But renewal in the Spirit is dangerous. It's dangerous not because of the potential of a church split over these issues. That's simply not going to happen. And it's dangerous not because of any sense of growing elitism, of a dividing among people who know what's happening and those who don't, because those who are involved in doing new ministry are working side by side with those doing older ministry, and because there are no secrets. No, the reason spiritual renewal is dangerous is because it brings with it a heightened attention from Satan.

Satan? You mean the devil? Yes, I mean the devil. I said I believe in the Bible and take it at face value. When you do, you will see Satan and evil spirits, demonic beings who interfere with God's creation at every level. But Satan and his minions are not interested in powerless or loveless Christians, for neither poses any threat to the work of interfering with God. If you try to be godly on your own power, or if you remain self-righteous and unloving, then you will receive no attention from the devil. You aren't doing any ministry worthy of attention.

We need to lay a foundation of discernment in the church because if we pursue spiritual renewal, if we open ourselves to a truly New Testament understanding of the kingdom of God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, then we open the door to the power of the Holy Spirit as well. That power was expressed through healing and proclamation, through the casting out of demons and the preaching of Jesus Christ as savior and lord. This is what happened in that Bible we believe in, and this is what God would have for us today. It's as if we forget or went to sleep over a period of many years. Spiritual renewal is the notion that we have been reminded of the way we are supposed to be.

In fact, God often withholds power until a process of discernment is in place in a local church. That's because the power of God is dangerous. It's dangerous not because it's frightening, but because this power of God is real - it works. Now, when I speak of spiritual reality, there are three to mention: there is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity; there is our individual spirit, our soul, our sense of self; and there are evil spirits, demonic beings. Have any of you been to a Buddhist or Taoist temple in Asia? In not all but many such temples, often just outside, you will find a pile of used wooden crutches. People came to the temple to ask for healing, and they were healed, and in thanksgiving, brought their now-unused crutch as a

symbol that the spiritual forces are powerful at this temple. Do I believe that these people were really healed? Absolutely. Why? Because the greatest power in the universe is spiritual power, and there is power to heal I the spiritual realm. But not all spiritual power is holy. There may be spirits there, but I am certain it is not the Holy Spirit.

Thus, we need a process of discernment that distinguishes between things spiritual. We need a process that goes beyond an awareness of spiritual things into a focused separation of what is *with* Jesus Christ and what is opposed to or outside of Jesus Christ. For our Christian body to be a discerning body, we need people who:

- **(1) Have the Holy spirit dwelling within them, that is, people who have invited Jesus Christ into their life as Lord and as Savior. People who have a living relationship with Jesus.**

- **(2) Have a will that is set upon doing God's will, that is, before one can discern clearly the words of God, one must have a desire to become holy in the way of Jesus Christ.**

- **(3) Have a foundation in Scripture, that is, a hunger for and an awareness of God's Word as an authority in life.**

- **(4) Are part of the body of Christ, that is, not people who think they can know God alone or on the golf course or by way of television, but are active in a local congregation where spirits are tested and accountability is possible - and encouraged!**

- **(5) Are conscious of their worldview, that is, people who recognize that no one talks of demons in a modern and post-modern world, but that the lack of talk about demons doesn't mean they don't exist; they didn't retire, they just helped raise a screen or filter over the eyes of our generations. It's hard to discern things in which you don't believe!**

- **(6) Are working to sharpen their powers of observation, that is, to be able to see the working of the Holy Spirit in their own life and in the lives of others, and to see how God might be calling, in the use of gifts, in evangelism, in discovering vision for our church.**

This process of discernment of the working and inspiration of the Holy Spirit is complicated with many dimensions. Discernment is not the mechanical application of certain tests to the Holy Spirit, but rather a dynamic process of engagement with the Holy Spirit and a heart understanding of the ways the Spirit customarily works. I believe there are four guidelines or tests of discernment which we can always use to discern if a vision or direction or word is really from God:

- **(A)** ***Does it give glory to Jesus Christ in the present and in the future?*** **John 14:26; 16:14.**
  The Holy Spirit is narrow-minded with a constant focus on Jesus, and the Holy Spirit never disconnects from Jesus.

- **(B)** ***Is it consistent with the intentions and character of God as revealed in Scripture?*** **John 2:22; 2 Timothy 3:14-17.**
  You can't separate the Word of God from the Spirit of God.

- **(C)** ***Do other people who are filled with the Holy Spirit have a confirming witness?*** **1 Corinthians 2:14-16; 14:29.**
  When we get a word or vision or direction which we believe is from God, we need to talk to one another in the body of

Christ. And, fresh inspiration must be freshly discerned, that is, *do not* lean on someone who has a 'track record.'

- **(D) *Is there a confirmation in objectively verifiable events or facts?* Deuteronomy 18:21-22; Isaiah 55:10-11.**
  The vision or direction or word may be something that is yet to come, so some time may have to pass before verification is complete, but if it is of God, it will take place.

All of these four guidelines or tests must be in place and they must function as a whole, or the discernment process will not be complete. These are the questions we should ask, as members or as leaders, as we seek to discern God's will. We need people who have the six characteristics, and we need consensus on the use of the four guidelines/tests of discernment. In this way, we will be prepared for the working of the Spirit, as He seeks to develop us into more effective witnesses for Jesus Christ, that Jesus may be glorified in our church.

Please pray for me and for our leaders as we seek both to understand and to establish this foundation for discernment!

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